

“The LORD Your God Is With You Wherever You Go.”

The seventieth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 1:1-9; Matthew 28:16-20

When we last took a break from our on-going series “I will be your God and you will be my people,” we had concluded the Book of Deuteronomy. The people of God had spent forty years wandering throughout the inhospitable desert of the Sinai. After a generation passed, the Lord led them out of the wilderness, taking them far to the north, where they entered the plains of Moab, just to the east of the Dead Sea in what is now Jordan. As Israel camped at Moab, God prepared his people to enter that good land flowing with milk and honey, which they would receive as their inheritance. God renewed the covenant which he made with Israel at Mount Sinai—the Book of Deuteronomy. All that remained was for Israel to cross the Jordan River, defeat the people of Jericho and then take the land. But then circumstances intervened. Knowing that his time had come, Moses pronounced his final blessing upon the twelve tribes of Israel, named Joshua as his successor, and then climbed Mount Nebo where the Lord showed him the promised land—from Gilead (to the south) to Dan (in the north). Then Moses died and was buried by the Lord.

With the death of Moses, Israel faced a major dilemma. Moses was the only leader they had ever known. What would happen to them now? Who would intercede for the people before YHWH? Who would lead Israel into the land across the river, where the dreaded Canaanites lived in great numbers? What would become of the covenant promises that the Lord had made to his people some forty-years before? How would the Israelites conquer the fortified city of Jericho, which blocked their entrance into the promised land? Many—indeed most—of those who had left Egypt had already died in the desert, and a new generation had become prominent among Israel’s twelve tribes. Despite the hope they felt as they marched north out of the wilderness in order to possess the land, and despite the renewal of the covenant on the plains of Moab, at the very moment the people find themselves on the brink of the realization of all that God promised, Moses was dead. After forty years of wandering in the desert, there were more questions than answers. They were so near, yet still so far.

During this period in redemptive history, the people of Israel begin to forget all that God has done for them. New generations of Israelites find themselves attracted to, and then influenced by the paganism and false religion all around them. In this sense, the struggle faced by the Israelites upon entering the promised land is much like the struggle Christians face today. How do we keep focused upon the promises of God? How do we resist the pull to be like the pagans around us? As we will see, there is much in the books of Joshua and Judges which relates to our own situation today.

As we return to this series, I’d like to do three things. First, we’ll look at the historical situation as the Book of Joshua opens and the people of Israel prepare to enter the promised land. Second, we’ll take a brief look at Joshua the man, since he is the key figure throughout this book. And then finally, we’ll turn to our text this morning, the first nine verses of Joshua.

What about the historical setting as Israel prepares to enter the promised land?

I want to begin by giving you a small homework assignment. Next time you get a chance, look through the maps in the back of your Bible. Find the map which traces the route of the Exodus. You’ll find that the Israelites ended up to the east of Canaan on the plains of Moab, just to the north of the Dead

Sea, and just across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. Identifying these places on a map will make this first few weeks of this series a bit easier because the places mentioned are important to the narrative.

Most conservative scholars believe that Israel arrived in Moab some time during the fifteenth century B.C. This was the very time when Canaanite culture was flourishing. The legal code of Hammurabi—Hammurabi was the first major king of what would become the Babylonian empire—was promulgated, and the merchants of Canaan were prospering since the major trade routes between Africa and Asia passed right through the land.¹ This flourishing Canaanite culture lies in the background of the promise found in Deuteronomy 6:10-12: “*And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” Indeed, the realization of this promise is the main theme of the Book of Joshua.

The geo-political climate of this period is also important to understand. There were three great empires during this time—all of which figure in the account of Israel entering Canaan and the conquest of the land. First, there are the Egyptians to the south, who were certainly no friend of Israel. Second, there were the Babylonians to the east (the so-called Mesopotamian empire). And then there are the dreaded Hittites—the super power of the age—who lived to the north. Providentially, the Land of Canaan was in the middle of all three empires, and was largely populated by loosely affiliated tribes, who had a reputation for great ferocity. This meant that there was a power vacuum of sorts, which would allow the Israelites to occupy the land without having to fight any of these three great empires.²

Next, we need to take a brief look at Joshua, who is the key figure in this account.

NThe name Joshua literally means, “the Lord saves,” or “the Lord is salvation.” Jesus has the same name, *iesous*, being the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. According to Numbers 13:16, Joshua was originally named “Hoshea” but was given a new name by Moses, probably as a sign of Joshua’s dedication to YHWH. The first time Joshua is mentioned in the Exodus account after the Israelites leave Egypt is in Exodus 17:8-13 during Israel’s war with the Amalekites. When Amalek’s armies threatened Israel, it was Joshua who was ordered by Moses to organize an army to face him. This was the battle in which as long as Moses raised his arms, Israel was victorious, but when Moses lowered them out of fatigue, the Israelites began losing. After propping Moses’ arms up with stones, Joshua and his men emerged from this battle victorious. It is apparent that Joshua is a skilled fighter and the leader of Israel’s armies. His tactics have been studied by generals, and he is often regarded as a skilled leader—which explains why many who have preached through Joshua focus upon his leadership skills. Throughout our series on Joshua, we will focus upon Joshua as the covenant successor to Moses (and in that sense a type of Christ), as well as a transitional figure as the people of Israel develop from wandering

¹ David M. Howard, Jr. Joshua: The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 46-50.

² Howard, Joshua, 46-50.

nomads into a great nation, firmly settled in the land of promise after the conquest.³

When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai after leaving Egypt, Joshua is among those chosen to climb up Mount Sinai, when the law was given and where YHWH was present. In Exodus 24:13, we read, “*So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.*” This indicates that Joshua was a young man and a protegee of Moses, and someone granted access to the presence of the LORD. Joshua will play a similar role in the Golden Calf incident as well. In Exodus 32:17 it is Joshua, the soldier, who reports “*there is a noise of war in the camp.*” Well, it may have sounded like a war, but it was that tragic moment of Israel’s rebellion and apostasy when Aaron made a statute of the golden calf as the people of Israel danced around it. From the report given in Exodus 33:11, we know that Joshua had some kind of role at the Tent of Meeting. There we read, “*thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.*” There can be no doubt that Joshua was an important and rising figure among the Israelites, and would be the natural successor to Moses.⁴

But as a young man, Joshua shows the intemperance of his youth. In Numbers 11:28, when Eldad and Medad began to prophesy, we read that it was “*Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, ‘My lord Moses, stop them.’*” Moses’ reply demonstrates that Joshua still had much to learn. “*But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’*” This shows us that Joshua must grow in stature and wisdom as Israel makes its way from Sinai to the promised land—and in fact, he does.

When the time came for the Israelites to send spies ahead into Canaan to scope out the bounty of the land, as well as the military strength of the tribes who lived there, Joshua was among those selected to go on this dangerous mission. Of the twelve men sent out to spy, only Joshua and Caleb reported back that with YHWH’s help, it was indeed possible for Israel to conquer the promised land. Because the other spies did not believe that it was possible and led the people of Israel to doubt that God could fulfill his promise, all Israel was sentenced to wander through the wilderness of the Sinai for forty years until that generation which did not believe the promise, finally died in the desert. Because of their faith in God’s promise, Joshua and Caleb, as well as their descendants, were promised that they would see the promised land, and indeed, live long enough to dwell there themselves. In this book, that promise will be realized.

Having gained sufficient maturity, Joshua becomes the clear successor to Moses. In Numbers 27:18-23, at the LORD’s command, Joshua is commissioned to become Moses’ eventual replacement. “*So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.’ And Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the LORD directed through Moses.*” And so when the

³ M. G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 162-164.

⁴ See the discussion in Richard S. Hess, Joshua: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 23-25.

time finally came for Moses to die and go to be with the LORD, and for Israel to enter the promised land, we read in Deuteronomy 34:9, that *“and Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses.”* God had provided his people with a capable successor to Moses who would indeed lead them into the promised land. The time had now come for Israel to enter the land.

As the Book of Joshua opens, we see the very close connection between this book, and the last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy. In the first 9 verses, God gives Joshua (and Israel) a solemn charge which issues forth in responsibilities that Joshua must accept and endeavor to fulfill.

Verse 1 ties Joshua directly to Moses and that covenant which had been renewed on the plains of Moab. *“After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, ‘Moses my servant is dead.’”* Moses is described as the servant of the Lord, which stresses the depth of his fellowship with the LORD, as well as his unique role as the covenant mediator, in which Moses the servant of YHWH, revealed YHWH’s will to the people of Israel. Joshua is described as Moses’ assistant, identifying him as the same man who climbed Mount Sinai with Moses. This term indicates that even as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so now he will speak to Joshua. God has ensured that his covenant will have mediator and that there will be someone to lead the people of God into the land of Canaan. Both roles coalesce in one man (Joshua), pointing us to the greater Joshua (Jesus).

The fact that Moses is the servant of YHWH and that Joshua is his assistant, lies in the background of those New Testament passages where Paul speaks of Christians as “servants of Christ” (e.g. Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 7:22; Ephesians 6:6). But then there is the passage in John 15:15, where Jesus gives this concept of being a servant of the Lord a whole new meaning. *“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* What was exceptional under the Old Covenant, is the norm for all members of the New. While we are bondservants of Christ, we are at the same time friends of God.⁵ This is why Jesus could say that every member of the New Covenant is greater than any member of the Old. That’s because in Jesus Christ, the master’s will is revealed.

In verses 2-5, we find a basic outline of that which will be described in great detail later in this book. *“Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”*

Let’s unpack this. In verse 2, Joshua mentions the crossing of the Jordan River. This is the main theme of Joshua from 1:1-5:12—entrance into the land. In verse 3, Joshua outlines the conquest of the land—“every place you put your foot, God will give you.” This conquest is the theme of Joshua 5:13—the end of chapter twelve. Verse 4, which gives us the boundry of the land—from Lebanon on the north, to the Euphrates on the east, to the Mediterranean on the west—sets the stage for chapters 13-22, where the land is divided among the twelve tribes. In verse 5, God renews his promise to Joshua (and therefore to

⁵ Hess, Joshua, 68.

Israel), which is the theme of the the final two chapters of Joshua (23-24). Notice too that the land promise in verse 4, is the same as that of Genesis 10 and Numbers 13 and 34. As we will see in the coming weeks the land promise is tied to the renewal of the covenant as the covenant inheritance.

As the Book of Joshua opens, the people of Israel are still camped on the plains of Moab. But soon they will cross over the Jordan. They will inherit the land God will give them—notice the emphasis in verse 2, the land “I will *give* them”—by defeating the Canaanites and driving them out of the land. From the opening verses of Joshua, throughout the entire account of Israel’s conquest of the land, we must understand that the various tribes who we will call “the Canaanites,” are squatters and interlopers in a land they have no right to occupy. Seeing things in this light will help us to understand the main theme of this book—God fulfilling his promise and giving Israel this land—and will help us understand why the Israelites are commanded to totally destroy all those who live here. God will use the sword to restrain evil as well as avenge wrong-doing—in this case the evil and paganism of the Canaanites.

The point is that the land of Canaan belongs to YHWH, not the tribes who happen to live there. While it is easy to view the Canaanites as those poor people who rightly occupy the land and that the Israelites unjustly remove them (the view of skeptics and critical scholars), the redemptive-historical situation is the exact opposite. The land is YHWH’s. He has promised this land to Israel as their covenant inheritance. God gives Israel the land because he owns it and because it is his gift to his covenant people. In effect, these verses in Joshua 1 reiterate that promise of Deuteronomy 3:21-22: “*And I commanded Joshua at that time, ‘Your eyes have seen all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings. So will the LORD do to all the kingdoms into which you are crossing. You shall not fear them, for it is the LORD your God who fights for you.’*” Israel could never occupy the land in their own strength—because the Canaanites are fierce warriors. The hand of YHWH must deliver the land to them.⁶ This is what Joshua and Caleb understood when they reported back to Moses forty years before. This is what the other ten spies and then the people of Israel, failed to grasp. Yes, the Canaanites will be tough fighters. Yes, this will be difficult. But can God keep his promises? The Book of Joshua tells us that he does.

In verses 6-8, the covenant promise (summarized in verses 2-5) issues forth in a call for courage on the part of Joshua, which is grounded in a confidence in the power and purposes of God. In these verses, YHWH directs Joshua, “*be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*”

The Book of the Law is a reference to the Book of Deuteronomy—the covenant just renewed on the plains of Moab, and to the Law of Moses which was given forty-years earlier at Sinai. The covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, while part of the covenant of grace (in terms of its administration), is clearly founded upon the works principle of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. Not only is Joshua to obey the demands of the covenant—not to depart from the law in the slightest (i.e. go to the left or the right)—should he do as God commands, God will grant Israel success, i.e., victory over all those who block their way into the promised land. For the covenant promise to be realized, Joshua must be strong and courageous, knowing that YHWH will be with him and with his people.

⁶ Howard, Joshua, 77-81.

This command is not a leap in the dark—“Joshua, defy the odds, do the impossible, go against your instincts.” No, Joshua is to be courageous because the sovereign God has promised to be with him wherever Israel and its armies go. He has witnessed God’s faithfulness first hand. This is why Joshua is commanded to obey the covenant stipulations, even as God promises that he will be faithful to the covenant he has made with Israel. As we read in verse 9, *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”* This is why Joshua is not to depart one *iota* from the law. This is why Joshua is to be confident and courageous. YHWH is with him. YHWH will give him the victory over the Canaanites. Israel will inherit the land of promise. God will keep his promises.

Ironically, we are in much the same place today as Israel was while camped on the plains of Moab. In fact, the same covenant promise that God gave to Joshua is reiterated in the New Testament and given to us, the people of God, through the greater Joshua, Jesus Christ.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus leaves his disciples with the following words. *“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”* While given in the greater light of the coming of Jesus, this promise is remarkably similar to that given to Joshua.

As God gave Israel the land in fulfillment of the promise that he made to the patriarchs and to Moses (and to all Israel), in many ways, the Christian life is same for us as entering the land was for Israel, camped in Moab with the promised land in sight, and yet with seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way. Do we believe that we will inherit everything that God has promised us? Do we believe that God will keep his word and that we will receive everything he has promised? Or, like the ten spies and the majority of those in Israel, do we see the troubles of life, the obstacles we face, and then doubt that God will keep his promise? Even worse, will we give in to the remarkably strong temptation to identify with the Canaanites around us, who, in their thinking and doing, live for personal pleasure and become a law unto themselves, doing only what feels right, while rejecting what God commands.

Just as Israel was to enter Canaan confident in the power of God, so, says Jesus, we are to go into all the world, making disciples and teaching the nations not to depart from the word of God—all that God has commanded. And just as God was with Joshua, so too the greater Joshua is with us. All authority has been committed to the Lord Jesus, and he will never leave us nor forsake us. Just as Joshua had witnessed the power of God, so too we live in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection. As God will conquer the enemies of God’s people (the Canaanites), so Jesus has already conquered our greatest enemy—death and the grave. Jesus has died for our sins, and he was raised for our justification. Therefore, be strong and courageous! For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go! Amen!